A TROUBLED YOUTH

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Richard Maxwell won the Leitrim Guardian Literary Award 2007

This story is written to coincide with Mental Health Week, and to note the great changes that have taken place for the better in people's attitude towards mental health. The people named in this story are fictional. Some of them are the victims of what happened in those dark days in a system and society that failed them.

IT WAS A lovely September evening in 1943. Joe Murray was going back to school in a few days time. He wasn't looking forward to it at all, a bright lad, got on well with his studies, had good friends but was bullied by a boy who had returned from England with his parents. Jim Begley was his name. Begley tried everything he could to upset Joe and got another boy to help him in his evil ways.

Joe dreaded getting up in the morning, making all kinds of excuses to avoid school. His parents were wondering what was wrong; his teacher didn't know what the problem was either. Joe was the second of a family of four. His father was getting casual work with the County Council, he wasn't happy with himself but did the best he could to please his parents. After a few months he stopped going to school.

One day when Joe was in the hayshed he saw the local Garda coming in the back gate. The Garda knocked at the door, 'Good day Mrs Murray', he said as she opened the door. 'Anything wrong?' she asked with a worried look. 'I have just come from the school,' he said. 'Your son Joe is missing a lot of time there,' 'He won't go back', she answered. He is not himself', she added. 'He needs to see a doctor'. 'I'll be in touch', the guard replied. Joe could see and hear their conversation from his vantage point in the hayshed.

Mrs Murray kept a flock of geese and the guard had to pass them on his way out, now anyone what knows anything about geese will tell you that you just have to be very alert because the gander is never far away. Mrs Murray gave a warning shout but it was too late. The gander had already given the guard a 'nip' in a very tender place. 'Ya dirty....' and he stopped short of uttering a swear word. 'That bloody William', a clearly annoyed Mrs Murray said. 'I'll wring his neck, come in guard', she said. 'I'll nurse a bit of goose grease on it and it will ease the pain'. 'I'm alright', he snapped and got back his bicycle and walked home, unable to cycle for obvious reasons.

Joe was watching the whole performance, it was the first good laugh he had in a long time. 'That'll keep him away for a while' he said to himself. He continued to work on the farm. At this stage he had stopped going out. His school friends went their different ways and soon he found himself isolated and alone. One night when he went to bed he overheard his parents talking about him, how little interest he had in anything and what the future held for him. He could not go on like this and would have to get medical help.

Joe was very vulnerable, he felt unloved and unwanted at home. 'Pull yourself together' the GP told him. Joe Murray had depression and he was unable to stop the unviable force that was dragging him down. After a few years his father got sick and died. Tom, the oldest, took over the running the farm. He had a job with the council. Joe and Tom didn't agree, no matter what Joe did it wasn't right. When Joe was twenty six his mother died and soon after her death Tom got married.

Joe Murray was at his lowest point now. Unwanted at home, Mick Burke, a good friend and neighbour advised him to get help. The doctor told him he would have to get treatment and handed him a letter. Next morning with a heavy heart he boarded the train and when he reached the town, looked for directions and walked to the hospital. As he went in the front door he wondered what lay in store for him.

He handed the letter to the lady at reception. 'You'll have to see Dr. Carey' she announced. After a while he was called in. 'I'm Dr. Carey' the man at the desk said. 'You're Joe Murray'. 'That's right' Joe answered. 'Are you sleeping well'? 'Poorly' Joe replied. 'I'll prescribe some medication for you' the doctor said. The nurse who was present took him down to the day room. There were about twenty people there, most of them older than him. He was twenty six.

He got his tea at six but wasn't hungry. At eight he was shown his sleeping quarters. When he looked out the window he could see the town below. The mist was starting to fall on the mountain. It was only now the whole thing hit him. He would be there for a while. Tears started flowing, he was unable to sleep and to make matters worse the man across the hall had the hiccups, and the fellow beside him was snoring.

When he looked out the window the next morning the mist was still in the mountain and had also enshrouded the town. He made his way to the dining room. Porridge, egg and toast were served, he ate very little. The man across the table still had the hiccups. Everyone washed their own cups and plates, he was now at his lowest point. His cry for help went unnoticed and unanswered. Joe was now on his own, still wondering what the future held in store.

For the first few weeks he read a lot, there was a good selection of books at the library. It was now Spring, there was a big area under tillage. Joe loved to see things grow and spent a lot of his time there helping out. He got to know all the men. Things were looking a bit brighter now. Few visitors came during his time there. His two sisters came to see him when they came home from England during the summer. Pat Reilly, his best pal at school, also came and that helped him a lot. The first Christmas there was hard being away from home for the first time. He had made new friends, a lot of them finding themselves in the same situation as himself. He spent the next 38 years there.

In the ninty ninties the system changed. The old regime was dismantled and people were given suitable accommodation. Joe Murray lived on his own, well liked and respected, well looked after, he lived out his final days in a new system, nothing more than he deserved.

Depression is not a stigma anymore. Like any other complaint, it can be treated, and it can hit anyone. Joe didn't get help when he needed it. You could say 'he had the wrong complaint at the wrong time'. Joe died peacefully in 2006 and was laid to rest beside his parents, just a few fields from his home where 'through no fault of his own he spent a troubled youth'.

Name that Main Street! *(from page 72).*

1 Dromahaire 2 *Killargue* 3 Drumshanbo 4 Drumkeerin 5 & 6 Kinlough 7 Tullaghan 8 Manorhamilton